

The battle over budget numbers could quickly turn into a war over social policy.

Despite a plea by national Republican leaders for a truce on politically volatile social issues, conservative lawmakers and activists want to use the budget process to force action on their policy goals.

Social conservatives are clamoring for a showdown with the president on their plans to choke off money for Planned Parenthood, de-fund what they call “Obamacare” and overturn environmental regulations.

The influential Family Research Council’s political action arm is getting into the act, pressing Republicans to oppose any short-term spending bills that don’t eliminate funding for Planned Parenthood and ban use of District of Columbia funds for abortion, the group told POLITICO late Wednesday. The Family Research Council also plans to give negative marks on its annual scorecard to lawmakers who stray from that line.

It will all come to a head soon.

The next step for social conservatives is a push to ban abortion funding in D.C. as part of the next short-term spending bill, which would keep the government operating for a matter of weeks after March 18. But appropriators prefer a “clean” bill that sticks to the numbers — and were drafting legislation Wednesday afternoon to reflect that. Republican leaders are trying to balance those needs, strategies for attracting Senate votes and their own desire to keep focused on spending levels.

Behind the relatively minor tug-of-war over abortion in the nation’s capital lies a larger trend: Conservatives are increasingly trying to use “riders” — legislative provisions that are tacked onto spending bills — on spending bills to achieve long-time policy goals.

“Our budget goals are beyond just the numbers,” said Rep. Kevin Brady (R-Texas), who is a

member of the conservative Republican Study Committee. “There’s a growing number of the conference who want to get to the final push on it.”

The stakes are high for all involved. Republicans sense a chance to make major cuts to domestic programs and to cripple bastions of the political left. Democrats want to defend favored programs while also proving to independents that they believe in fiscal restraint. Both sides must show their bases that they can win a political fight. And many conservatives say that they are willing to sacrifice some of their spending cuts if they can win on social policy riders. (See: Senate Democrats push for spending deal)

“Everything is related to everything, and it is total package politics,” said Rep. Jack Kingston (R-Ga.), a member of the Appropriations Committee. “We want an A-plus, but, in this atmosphere, if we get a B, that’s OK, too. It’s better than last year.”

Republicans have already had a string of successes attaching pet policies to the pending spending bill.

They’ve restricted spending for the new health care law, and a variety of environmental protections caught a ride when the House passed a package of \$61.3 billion in cuts last month. So, too, did Indiana Rep. Mike Pence’s amendment eliminating federal funding for Planned Parenthood. That’s now the top priority for social conservatives as the House and Senate wrangle over how to keep the government funded through Sept. 30.

“If there’s a clear path forward in defunding Planned Parenthood, that’s the primary issue,” said Tony Perkins, president of the FRC. “Our view is it needs to be done sooner rather than later.”

Perkins, who said he has spoken to Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) and Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) about the issue, understands “the leadership is balancing many different issues.” Pence, a former member of House GOP leadership, has spoken to a host of conservative groups, including FRC, Focus on the Family, SBA List, and Concerned Women for America.

After the Senate rejected both the House Republican and Senate Democratic visions for a

seven-month spending bill Wednesday afternoon, a second short-term bill is expected to hit the House floor next week. Aside from the possible inclusion of the D.C. abortion rider, House Republicans say they expect most of the social policy to be left off for now.

And that's just fine with some Republican lawmakers — even a good number of social conservatives.

Rep. Lee Terry (R-Neb.), who supports the riders, said he believes the social policy distracts from the \$52 billion gap between Senate Democrats and House Republicans on how much to spend.

“That gives [Democrats] too much of an excuse to say no,” Terry said. “In the long-term you can have them in there ... I'd like to do it later in the process.”

But social conservatives, inside and outside Congress, say they want new social policy riders attached to each successive stopgap spending bill — and that they won't wait much longer on the big items.

“Gotta stay,” said Rep. Allen West (R-Fla.), when asked about the banning of money for Planned Parenthood. “Yeah, for me they have to stay. This is a very important thing. It's about being a good steward of American taxpayer dollars.”

When asked how it complicates Congress's pathway to passing the bill, West replied plainly: “It doesn't complicate it for me.”

“The will of the people spoke,” he said. “It came out of the House and that's the people's voice.”

Rep. John Campbell, a California Republican who has become an outsized conservative voice during the budget debate, said he's concentrated more narrowly on the bottom-line figure.

“I think that the major objective is to reduce the amount of spending. A secondary objective is what gets spent within what’s left. I do think though – the Planned Parenthood thing, from a fiscal standpoint, \$346 million to a private organization that’s doing this stuff,” Campbell said. “Regardless of whether you agree with what they’re doing or not doing, why are we doing that given that we’re as close to a fiscal crisis as the country is.”

Rep. Darrell Issa, another California Republican who chairs the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, said he’d settle for lesser cuts not for riders, but for more structural change to spending “that in the long run saves you more money.”

Perkins says GOP leaders have demonstrated so far that they are committed to following through, but suggested that their rank-and-file will keep them to it one way or the other.

“There is a sense that everybody wants to work with the leadership,” Perkins said. “But there’s also a strong desire that not just in word, but in the perception, that those members are keeping their pledge to voters.”